

## Narrative Lectionary: Paul's Conversion

April 15, 2018

I like reading the stories of couples who have been married a long time. The Oregonian prints these once in a while. Friday had a story about Ray and Marie Mahan, a couple who will celebrate their 70<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary in November. Sixty-five years ago, Marie was pregnant with twins, and they were tragically stillborn. Ray said that years later he was having heart surgery, and he found himself leaving his body and walking and walking. He found himself entering that tunnel of light.

I'll continue in his words: "Finally I came to the light at the end of the tunnel. And it was a beautiful place. Trees were just immaculately trimmed, and the grass and all the flowers. Five people coming out towards me. It was my mother and my father. Off to the right was two young ladies. They were our stillborn twins. My little brother, who died at three days old, was over to the left. Dad says, "I'm sorry, son. I'm afraid there's been a horrible mistake made. You have to go back."

"And I didn't even take time to say a proper hello. I just turned around and headed back. The way it worked with my dad, he would tell me something and I didn't question him. Well, I know I seen our kids. And I have no fear of dying."

That's not the first story I've heard like that, and not the first one you've heard either. So in our reading today, when a man named Saul is traveling, and all of a sudden there is light all around him, and the voice of the resurrected Christ speaks to him, I just appreciate the mystery. This world has deeper dimensions to it than we can measure. But something happened to Saul that turned him from a Christian-hating religious zealot to one of the most impactful followers of Jesus the world has ever known.

We've left the gospel of John, and we are now in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, the story of the early Church. Jesus says before he ascends to heaven: you'll be my witnesses. You will tell this story of my death and resurrection, or forgiveness and new life, starting in Jerusalem, going out to Judea, and then Samaria, and finally to the ends of the earth. Peter does a lot of the story-telling up until now, but now God is going to call somebody that nobody would suspect, and that's a man named Saul.

Saul is a Pharisee, one of Jews who is scrupulous about obeying the Law of Moses. He hates these Christians, because they follow this man who healed on the Sabbath and touched unclean people and ate with sinners. They can't be righteous. He's the one who held the cloaks of the man who were stoning Stephen to death back in chapter 7.

So he is on his way to Damascus, Syria, breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord. Here's what happens: Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

Paul asked, Who are you, Lord? The reply came, I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up, and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."

The men traveling with him were speechless, because they heard the voice but didn't see the vision. And Saul gets up from the ground, and his eyes are open, but he can't see. For three days he is in Damascus, not eating or drinking, but I'll tell you, he is thinking. He is thinking about that voice he heard. He's thinking about those rumors of resurrection. He's thinking about Stephen whom he saw die, Stephen who said as he was dying, Father, forgive them, they don't know what they're doing. How could he forgive the people who were killing him?

There is an interesting phrase used in the Greek in this story. The phrase translated get up in the story really is rise up. It's the same Greek word for resurrection. The risen Christ says to Saul, Rise up and go into the city. Saul rises up from the ground, and realizes he is blind. Somebody once said that the history of the Church is one resurrection after another. This is Paul's Easter. He is rising from death. He is rising into new life.

So Saul is in Damascus somewhere thinking. And meanwhile, over in another part of the city, a follower of the Way named Ananias has a vision. The Lord says, Ananias. Ananias says, Here I am, Lord. The Lord said to him, Get up (this is rise up again, God is going to do some resurrecting with Ananias too) Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying. (I would be too; everything he was convinced of is now in doubt)

And he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight. And Ananias said, Sounds good, Lord. I'll be right over.

No! Ananias knows who Saul is. He's a killer of Christians! He doesn't trust him as far as he can throw him. Maybe this is a trap. Maybe Ananias will walk into that house and Saul's men will grab him. So Ananias wisely, sagely, says, Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name." Makes all the sense in the world. I have to be careful, Lord. This is not my first rodeo. God, maybe you don't quite know who you're dealing with here.

But God had other ideas. God says, Go, for (Saul) is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel. I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.

The next three words are probably the most important of the story: So Ananias went....It doesn't say whether or not he was afraid. He probably was. The question is not are we afraid, although all the time God tells us, Don't be afraid. From my own experience the point is not so much to be fearless, but to journey on in spite of my fears, to move beyond my anxiety and do what God asks me to do. And if I move beyond my fears, God will meet me there.

I quoted from the painter Georgia O'Keeffe during Lent, and I can't get enough of this quote "I've been absolutely terrified every moment of my life - I've just never let it keep me from doing a single thing I wanted to do." Ananias is probably afraid to rise up and visit Saul, but he didn't let it stop him. He moves past his fears. So Ananias went.....

Ananias enters the house where Saul is staying, lays his hands on him, and says, "Brother Saul" (I love that! He is already calling him brother. God says you're a brother, so I'm going to believe it). "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up (rose up) and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

Walter Brueggemann compares the way we grow as people of faith with the story of the Hebrew people. He says we all start out with the law: the people were given 613 Laws of Moses. This is right and wrong, this is black and white. Then the people disobey. There is a crisis. They turn to other gods. They cheat on their spouses and they cheat at business. And God says, There are consequences. Off you go into exile. That's the prophets.

And when the people return, some of them go back to the law and redouble their efforts, and some discover that the black and white doesn't work as well anymore. And those are the Wisdom books: Job, Ecclesiastes, The Psalms. There is now more mystery to life; they don't have to have all the answers.

Paul started out as the answer man: everything was black and white. These people were in; these people were out. He knew the followers of Jesus were wrong. And then he meets somebody he thought was gone forever. He meets the Risen Christ. And he has to rethink those beliefs. It's often those crises in life that give us an opportunity to rethink our faith, to discover new dimensions of who God is.

Notice that Saul and Ananias are enemies, until Christ brings them together. Ananias knew who Saul was. He just didn't know God was at work changing him. I believe one of the hardest things to do in the Christian life is love people the way they are, but to be open to God changing our relationship. One of the things I have realized is that I can't change people, but if I accept people and pray God's best for them, and love them, that leaves the opportunity for god to do something. And maybe that is just to change me so that I see the relationship in a new way.

Saul was given those three days of darkness to think, to struggle, to reconsider. Maybe something has happened in your life where you need to approach things in a new way. Life has thrown you a set of blinders, and you're rethinking. And Ananias had to rethink as well. He was sure he knew who Saul was. But God has been at work in ways he couldn't see. And God was going to work through Saul in ways that Ananias could not imagine. Paul would be the one to carry the message of the crucified and resurrected Jesus all over the known world. We are here today because Paul brought the Gospel to Asia Minor and to Europe.

You know how God uses unlikely folks throughout the story of the Hebrew people: Abraham and Sarah were too old; Elijah was suicidal; Joseph was abused; Job went bankrupt; Moses had committed manslaughter; Jeremiah was too young; Jacob was a cheater, David used his power to abuse his neighbor's wife. And God used every one of those folks to accomplish God's purposes. Couldn't God use us?

We never hear from Ananias again. But because Ananias obeyed, Saul becomes Paul, and changes the world with the message of Christ. I wonder what little thing you might do this week that will affect the course of this world. Maybe it's faithful parenting. Maybe it's reaching out to that difficult student at school. Maybe